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THE EMERGENCY ASSIGNMENT

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For the convenience of those who must read in haste. I want to reserve theory for the end of this article, and give first quite disconnectedly, a set of workable class-exercises, ready for use. These study-units are called Emergency Assignments because they are not intended to represent the typical daily task. They have merely served me well in those desperate moments when books that I had planned to give out were delayed; or when for one reason or another the conventional routine work fell flat; or when the boys and girls felt "written out" of theme material.

TESTING A GENERALIZATION

The first of these exercises was suggested by a discussion in a class of high-school boys studying *Macbeth*. "There is no art to find the mind's construction in the face." Isn't there? they inquired. One boy insisted that even in a photograph one could guess at general social distinctions, traits, and the professional standing of the subject. Regardless of counter arguments, both as to this point and the proper interpretation of Duncan's statement, a committee was at once appointed to collect a set of striking faces photographed clearly, and to submit them to the class for study. We made this the basis of the theme for the week. Many of the pictures were found in the magazines and in the brown picture supplements of the New York papers. The committee announced that in its col-

lection were the following types of people: a great business man, a Duchess, a minister, a professional crook, a college president, an explorer, a noted criminal, a baseball celebrity, a newspaper man, an English peer, and artists and workers of all descriptions. Each member of the class was in honor bound to select a subject whom he did not recognize, and to write his most detailed analysis for the next day's theme. The design of the character-readings was not so much to guess the profession of the person under speculation as to disclose whatever traits were suggested by the face, and to reflect the personal impression produced by it. Free consultation with friends was allowable, so long as the persons consulted did not know too much. Next day the themes and pictures were examined in class with an open discussion of each analysis before the identity of the photographs was disclosed.

The same experiment was tried later with pictures brought in by various students who wanted to test the results with faces of more noted people, still unknown to many in the class. Certain of the pictures were of Forbes-Robertson, Tagore, Mrs Browning, Jane Addams, Marshall Field, Bronson Alcott, Dr. Seelye, Daniel Webster, Irvin Cobb, Whistler's Carlyle, James Whitcomb Riley, and Alexander's portrait of Walt Whitman. This last mentioned was included until it appeared that Walt was being regularly ordained into the ministry, whereupon I took the liberty of substituting Dr. Lyman Abbott as a more conventional representative of the cloth. After various experiments in different classes, it became clear that the ideal selection should comprise mainly those people whose biographies are available, as the discussions sent many to the library to hunt up their favorite characters either in *Who's Who* or in their own works. One boy read Stevenson's life and letters and many of his writings in an attempt to support a conviction that Stevenson's face had all the traits of a somewhat stagey but deep-dyed villain's. Finally he brought to class that wistful paragraph in *The Inland Voyage* where R. L. S. asks why it is that all officials at every port on his travels take him invariably for a suspicious character, and cast him into noisome dungeons as a spy, or at least a refugee from justice. Shakespeare, it seemed, was right about some minds' construction, after all.

This assignment, which can of course be introduced in connection with description or exposition quite independently

of *Macbeth*, insures at least two lively themes from every member of the most apathetic class; but it does require unusual paraphernalia.

THE SPELLING TEAM

The next device, the Spelling Team, demands none. Every teacher, now and then, has to meet and cope with a class of almost hopeless spellers. If those could only be caught in a perfectly wild state and taught their letters one at a time, it would be easier. But when they arrive at High School they do know some words already, and at others they are entirely content to guess. The problem is to make every member of the class discontented with his guess-work. Select about fifty of the worst words; terms like *seize*, *siege*, *occasionally*, *necessary*, *disappear*, *irresistible*, *describe*, *perseverance*, and *parallel*. Give out the set, take the rating of each student, and assign the list for part of the next day's study. Announce the fact that the very same list will be written every day as an introduction to the regular recitation, until not one mistake is made by a single member of the group. As long as one student misspells one word, the entire class goes on and on forever spelling that same set of words. The score is announced on the spot, publicly. Under these conditions it becomes unpopular to guess. The class begins to take an appreciative pride in its star spellers, and to coach between times those few who always delay the wheels of progress. When at last these words are mastered by the whole team, the class is rewarded with an additional fifty. Sometimes another section is studying the same lists of words with a spelling contest in view. Of course the only way in which this plan is different from regulation spelling lessons is the fact that the whole class is brought up to the level of the best before the list is considered learned at all. After this season of grinding toil, every boy feels keenly the difference between knowing a word and guessing at it, and the best spellers, upon whom this proceeding is almost an imposition, are the first to announce that at last they are absolutely sure about the spelling of the slippery *principles* and *principals*, *weird*, and *yield*, and the various assortments of *stationery*.

Whoever, by the way, objects that this kind of thing is grade work, says a true word. It is. But wherever you teach, in high school or in college, it is well for your

temper to make up your mind that it is your business to teach people what they do not know; regardless of your pleasant theories about what they ought to know.

OUTLINES AND NOTES

Of all the subjects belonging more properly to secondary school and college English, there is nothing that most pupils find more difficult than analytical outlining; that is, the sort of outlining that is not merely a succession of detached paragraph titles arranged and numbered, but an intelligible tabulation expressing the author's unelaborated thought in condensed and available form. Some of the finest students look upon the process as a species of homicide to the author, and of mental suicide when they attempt to prepare an outline for their own prospective themes. A safe way to introduce the despised outline is to announce a lesson on effective note-taking. Few students on entering college have the least notion of taking even the most sketchy sort of memoranda upon a lecture, and the outline method is of the greatest possible assistance. Have ready a well-arranged, up-to-date article which gives a detailed mass of information. The newspapers are full of such,—Lord Northcliffe's, William Filene's, Gerard's—anything that falls logically into topics and sub-topics, as the best expositions on current questions are likely to do. Then read the material slowly aloud, letting the class take notes by the light of nature merely. The normal, inexperienced note-taker puts down flurried fragments of sentences, an unimportant word here and there with nothing to recall its connection, and nouns with no verbs to explain their presence. All the while, he realizes that the notes would be of little value even to their author after the writing was cold. As soon as this thought begins to dawn, comes the chance to explain the convenience of arranging one's notes with a mechanical tabulation which shows at a glance their relative importance. A rough outline on the board will give the essentials of numbering and lettering so dear to the tabular expert, and the use of explanatory words can be encouraged by a few examples of the worthlessness of the unchaperoned noun. For example, take Lord Northcliffe on the Censorship. Ten out of every dozen pupils will begin,

A. Censor of press-England-America

I. How chosen; What powers.

a. Army officials, valuable news

b. Why dangerous

At once they must be made to realize that this sort of topical affair, which is in so many schools passes for an outline, is the most empty mockery, because it tells nothing; it merely gives titles to the facts that were stated. The key-word of the statements must be preserved if notes are to recall information. The above outline as revised the same day read as follows:

A. Press Censorship presents dangers

I. Censor, given full power over news; not chosen as news expert.

a. Original English censor, army officials, no news instinct.

b. Valuable news overlooked by him.

c. News needlessly suppressed; contorted.

After a short period of training in arranging and retaining the information in brief articles of this sort, the average class will be ready for longer readings, portions of Dr. Cabot's chapter on *Work*; William James' chapter on *Attention and Habit*; or Arnold Bennett's, *Human Machine*. With the outline knack developed in this way, it is easier to call attention to the interesting skeleton in every literary creation, and to explain the useful points of including a similar framework in one's own writings. Personally I am not in favor of using Washington Irving and Hawthorne and Poe for outline purposes. Newspaper articles have so much more prominent skeletons.

In connection with the foregoing drill on note-taking, it is natural to emphasize the importance of the accurately quoted phrase. Few young students will fail to respond to the lure of "the inevitable word", once its existence is pointed out. A striking phrase or two should be caught and jotted down, thus preserving the words exactly as their author arranged them. Nothing develops literary tone more swiftly than this sharp look-out for significant phrase; and nothing gives greater value to literary study than the habit of retaining in memory or in note-book these little characteristic scraps of artistic language. Students should

memorize more than they do, and they are easily encouraged to commit to memory short sentences, striking epithets, and brief passages rich with meaning. A literary work is not adequately read unless fragments of language are singing in their minds. Involuntary memorizing occurs more frequently with most people than they guess until someone suggests that they try to recall a few of the author's precise words; and the habit is easily cultivated. One of the most interesting sets of sentences for memorizing was chosen by a certain class of sophomore boys who were studying Palmer's *Odyssey*; and of all the notable sentences chosen, the most immediately popular was the remark of the discreet Telemachus, "One's dinner at the proper time is no bad thing!"

Occasionally it is feasible to try note-taking on oral themes, particularly when the compositions are upon special topics of value to the course. It is a method of counteracting the tendency of certain pupils to regard the oral theme period as a session of sweet silent thought after their own speech is delivered. But in spite of its value to the audience, this plan does destroy whatever pleasure the speaker feels in his hearers. Indeed, to many a young lecturer, the sight of notes being "taken on him" is unnerving. A safer way to insure active cerebration during the oral theme is to allow the speaker to quiz the class as to his subject-matter after finishing his talk. According to this plan, each speaker prepares beforehand several questions with which he tests his attentive class-mates, (and occasionally his teacher!) after his lecture is over.

THE TEACHER'S THEME

No instructor, even in an emergency, cares to make too obvious an effort to be "one of the class" in this way. Yet nearly all true emergency assignments have the virtue of placing pupils and teacher in the same untried, venture-some position. If a particularly difficult moment arrives in any composition course, a sudden increase of interest will be gained if the teacher promises to have a theme written at the time when the rest are due, said theme to be shuffled with the rest and criticized along among the others, incognito. Or after reading a set, let the teacher announce the fact that among the essays just criticized was one of his own. Few things stimulate a group of students more powerfully than the consciousness that the teacher is still

studying,—a notion usually quite remote from their conception of the functions of the instructor. In the undergraduate estimation, the teacher has learned, has written, has translated, and is now a director and inventor of toil, a corrector of sentence-structure, and an officer of the law. I shall never forget what a deep impression was made once upon a time, when the teacher of our Vergil class read us a metrical translation of his own. He explained that since he had asked us to write one, he thought it only fair to get into the work himself. It takes talent and courage and character to do that. As teachers, we hate to read our own writings to our classes, some of us because we never write, and the rest because we think that they will think that we think ourselves model literary workmen; which we must rise to explain that we aren't! But the fact remains that there is no more effective way to rouse a fine type of comradeship over the daily task than to do one, now and then, oneself.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS

This leads me to the last device of the set, itself not an assignment, but a way of making vital the teacher's influence upon the preparation of the assignment. Students often feel that their standard of daily effort is absolutely unnoted by the teacher; they are lost in the shuffle; whatever estimate they receive is roughly recorded in their "marks," with now and then a word in passing. A perennial working understanding between faculty and individual is hard to achieve in our schools where conferences are rare and arranged with difficulty. There is one experiment which is herewith offered in fear and trembling. It should be tried only after a season of fasting and vigil. On separate slips of paper, write the names of all your students, and under the names your detailed opinion of their works and ways. As carefully as possible, estimate their strongest points, and indicate the place where their effort needs to be reinforced. Plan to complete these estimates just half-way between the times for the regular reports. Explain beforehand your reasons for giving each one an idea where he stands; urge conferences about the work; and request that nobody show his slip to his neighbor. Make it possible for that last behest to be obeyed by having the slips arranged according to rows, so that you can dart up and down the aisles at a maximum speed, thus distributing all the slips before the first student finishes reading his.

Then I, for one, collect the slips at once with equal despatch. I do not care to have my handwriting framed on any wall. But swift copies are sometimes made; and classes have presented discreet petitions requesting that the custom might be resumed, when by reason of indolence I discontinued the habit for a while. For those angels who fear to tread this place where I rush in, there is, of course, that other way in which bits of personal comment may be written on corrected themes. A word of thoughtful praise or advice added to the technical criticism of the composition serves to let the student know that he is distinguished from his neighbors. A successful writer once told how he treasured beyond all press-reviews of his books a certain teacher's comment written long ago upon his boyish theme: "I wish that I might see your writing ten years hence." It gave him his first moment of consciousness of literary power.

Such power is in our hands to rouse or quell. Beyond all emergency devices we find that stirring theory,—the theory reserved, as was said before, until the close.

EDITORIAL NOTES

All members of the Association will unite in congratulating the trustees of Smith College on their selection of a president. Professor William Allan Nielson has long been one of our most prominent members, and by his help in our inner councils he has aided greatly in the shaping of our policies. His intellectual grasp and his unusual facility in phrasing his conceptions have long served to enliven and enlighten our conferences. It is those English teachers who know him most intimately that have most confidence in his success in the administrative field.

Our Association has planned two important meetings for this fall. The first is our regular gathering to be held on Saturday morning, November 24 in the lecture room of the Boston Public Library. The general theme for discussion is the broad subject of English Speech. We shall hope to discover in conference how this may be improved in the pupil's conversation, in oral themes, and in oral reading. The details will be announced later. The second meeting will be held in Springfield on December 8th. This

meeting is one arranged jointly by our Association and by the New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. We hope that when the full program is announced all the English teachers of the Connecticut Valley, will make their plans to attend. One of the themes for discussion will be the current war literature and new books available for literature classes.

RECENT ENGLISH BOOKS

Reade's *The Cloister and The Hearth*. Edited by A. B. de Mille, Milton Academy. Scott, Foresman and Company.

Effective English. By Philander P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education, and James McGinnis, Principal of the High School, Ludlow, Kentucky. Allyn and Bacon.

A prominent feature of this new text is its wealth of photographic material.

Composition and Rhetoric. By Henry W. Holmes A.M., Professor of Education, Harvard University, and Oscar C. Gallagher A.M. Headmaster West Roxbury High School, Boston. D. Appleton and Company.

The authors of this attractive text have for several years been collecting material for this work and most of it has been thoroughly tested in the class room. A feature that most heartily commends itself is the emphasis placed upon the assignment. The Appendix provides in condensed form the minimum essentials of English grammar.

English Composition. Chester Noyes Greenough, Ph.D., Professor of English in Harvard University, and Frank Wilson Cheney Hersey, A.M. Instructor in English in Harvard University. The Macmillan Company.

While this book is designed especially for college classes there are many exercises admirably adopted for high-school pupils. Many of the illustrations are from photographs taken by Mr. Hersey in Europe. The authors have made splendid use of these in developing the effective choice of details for narration and description. The entire text will be an inspiration to any English teacher.

The Teaching of English in the Secondary School. A textbook for College and Normal School Courses in the Teaching of English, by Charles Swain Thomas, A.M., head of the English Department, Newton (Mass.) High School, with an introduction by Alexander Inglis, Assistant Professor of Education, Harvard University.

For the materials of this new volume the author has drawn freely from his lectures used in Harvard University during the recent summer sessions.

Essays and Essay Writing. Selected and edited by Professor William M. Tanner, of the University of Texas. The Atlantic Monthly Company.

This book provides exactly the sort of material which is desired by those teachers of composition who wish to develop originality in their pupils. The short essays—chosen entirely from the Contributor's Club of *The Atlantic Monthly*—show literature in the making. They are particularly interesting because the authors have escaped the more usual grooves of thinking and have, by their insight and cleverness, infused their work with the charm of their personality.

A practical test of the usefulness of the volume has already been made with high-school classes, and the success has been most marked. Its adaptability for college classes—literature classes or composition classes—is of course strikingly obvious.

Knowing and Using Words. By William D. Lewis and Mabel D. Holmes. Allyn and Bacon. This book is designed "to guide the learner in establishing a method for the mastery of the word-basis of his spoken and written English."

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